

Creating Possibility While Managing Reality



Karen was a competent director of a core service unit at a major health care institution. She was well regarded by the unit's nurse managers, educators and charge nurses.

Karen reported to the Vice President of Nursing, who recognized the complexity and challenges inherent in Karen's unit. These included managing a diverse staff and developing collaborative relationships with sometimes prickly physicians who brought in many patients and significant revenue. Karen's VP decided to support Karen in her effort to successfully manage the unit by sending her to an outside leadership program and hiring an executive coach for customized professional guidance.

Karen benefited greatly from her organization's recognition and support of her developmental needs. But she also encountered a hard-to-surmount difficulty. As she discovered new approaches and possibilities for her unit, the unit's day-to-day demands grew even more significant. Using the word "overwhelming" to portray them, Karen painted a verbal picture filled with compelling—and sometimes competing—responsibilities and tasks. She described the hospital's circumstances in equally convincing terms, noting an overflowing ER and at-capacity occupancy. Karen was not whining. She was depicting realities that were hard to navigate.

As Karen became an increasingly savvy unit director, she implemented an aggressive development plan for her direct reports so they could assume more responsibility. She provided guidance, resources, and support for them, and the nurse managers blossomed. Karen's workload changed to some extent. Yet, even with these and similar strategies, Karen still reported feeling like a "hamster in a cage."

What was happening for her? Unfortunately, Karen had fallen prey to a common malady among nurse managers. As described in a 2002 study,¹ 92% of participating nurse managers from 21 health

systems identified 21 of 23 leadership competencies as important or very important. Study participants reported that they and their nurse manager colleagues have an internal, unconscious belief that *they need to perform proficiently in every leadership arena simultaneously and continuously.*

As study participants reflected on the study's results, they said that "if all (leadership) competencies (and responsibilities) are essential, it is easy to see why many nurse managers become overwhelmed."

How does this apply to Karen? Like the study participants, Karen believed that all her leadership duties must be addressed *all of the time*. Like the study participants, Karen needed to change this overwhelming—and impossible to fulfill—belief. Like the study participants, Karen needed to set realistic priorities for her own development and task management. Difficult as it was, Karen had to decide what was most important. Also, she needed to be willing to delegate or let other tasks go. Equally significant, Karen's VP needed to contribute to and support Karen's choices on an on-going basis.

In addition to priority setting, what else can Karen do? How can she address priorities, move forward with her day-to-day work, *and* accomplish the work that will take her unit to the next level?

Fortunately, there is a strategy leaders can employ when we are successful but mired solely in day-to-day work. We can create a compelling way to move forward while honoring what's important today. *We can design a personalized, vivid, detailed, and persuasive leadership vision.*

This is not the type of "shared vision" we discussed in the Coaching Forum's "Creating a Better Future" in December 2006. This vision is different. This vision reflects what is uniquely possible for us as leaders. This vision is one of our own making. This vision offers a crystal-clear picture of who we want and need to be to achieve outstanding and satisfying results.

The more detailed that picture, the more clearly we will be able to see and live the possibilities we imagine for ourselves and our work.

Here are some of the components of a personal leadership vision. You can address all or some of these aspects, or create new features of your own.

First, establish a time frame: by what date do you want to achieve this vision? (6 months from now, 1 year, etc). Once you have addressed this, consider the following:

- What are you doing and accomplishing in your best leadership moments?
- What is your role?
- What does leadership excellence look like for you? Be specific.
- What are the most important things for you to accomplish every day?
- What is truly less important to you?
- What are your long-term goals for yourself as a leader?
- What are the long-term goals for the organization to which you are committed?
- How do you balance the every day demands of your life and position with the longer-term goals you want to achieve?
- Who is with you on your journey of accomplishment? Consider family, friends, colleagues, collaborators, community members, and others. Be specific. What is their involvement in your life and how do they support your vision as a leader?
- How do you feel inside as a leader and as a human being?
- What do you do on a regular basis to care yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually?

Once you have created this compelling, written vision for yourself, consider whether you want to set interim goals and dates for achieving them. Also reflect on what resources, support, and personal habits you will need to attain your

vision. How will you address those? How are you going to measure your progress? How will you know you are successful?

Don't try to create a perfect vision. Do create a vision that is good enough to accurately capture what is truly most important to you as a nurse leader and human being.

Once you have crafted your vision, make it live by memorializing it. Put your vision in a tangible form that will remind and ground you, especially as you encounter the pulls of every day life on the job.

Here are a few ways to make a representation of your vision that is concrete and real.

- Construct a succinct one- or two-sentence vision statement
- Create a personal logo that represents the spirit of your vision
- Capture the essence of your vision in a picture or collage from magazine clippings
- Identify three or four descriptive adjectives on a 3 x 5 card and put it by your phone or computer so you see it frequently

No matter what form your reminder takes, you will benefit from seeing it often. Also, set aside time at least weekly to visit your vision, review your goals and your progress, reward yourself and plan your next steps.

Selecting day-to-day priorities and developing leadership vision are critical activities for nurse leaders. Having these in place allows busy, potentially overwhelmed leaders to address two significant demands: managing day-to-day reality and laying the ground work for an even more successful future. Karen did both these things: she set new priorities and sought input and support from her VP. She also developed her personal vision and produced a brief, clear, persuasive vision statement that now hangs on her office wall. She sees it every day. Karen and her VP say she is

better prepared, more focused, more relaxed, and less frustrated. Karen sees clearly how it is today, but she also sees clearly how she wants it to be tomorrow.

Reference

1. Robinson-Walker C, Detmer S. 2002 Nurse Managers' Leadership Study. Copies available on request.

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